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ABSTRACT

Teachers of public relations and other communication areas, with endorsement from the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC), should request the data processing industry to develop assisted instruction programs in journalistic writing. Such action would provide a clearly defined need for a significant market and spur the industry to respond affirmatively. The Public Relations Division of AEJMC can take the lead in this effort by stating requirements to the computer industry for interactive computers with programs geared to teach and reinforce the mechanics of grammar, punctuation, spelling, abbreviation, capitalization, word compounding, titles, and other style book forms. It can also suggest that these programs be applied in departmental communications computer centers, which could serve as laboratories for student writers. Committee action should also be taken to consider long term requirements for standardized interactive terminals and programs for public relations and other communications students in writing. Part of this consideration would be the "Writer's Advisor"--a series of interactive programs designed to assist writers by pointing out potential writing improvements through evaluation of readability, use of quotation, personalization, key word assessment, spelling, punctuation, and expression. (HOD)

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Public Relations
Division

THE COMPUTER AS AN AID TO PUBLIC RELATIONS WRITING

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Presented to the Public Relations Division,
Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication
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Public Relations Division

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes that the Public Relations Division of AEJMC take the lead in applying Computer Assisted Instruction techniques to the teaching of writing in public relations and other areas of communications. Noting that university level student writers have not yet mastered the basics of grammar, punctuation, and style, and that teachers of writing are consequently required to use inordinate amounts of vital class time on these fundamentals, the paper calls for two channels of action to be led by PRD:

(a) Committee action to state requirements to the computer industry for interactive computers with programs geared to teach and reinforce the mechanics of grammar, punctuation, spelling, abbreviation, capitalization, word compounding, titles and other stylebook forms. It is also suggested that these Basic Course Programs be applied in departmental Communications Computer Centers.

(b) Committee action to consider long term requirements for standardized interactive terminals and programs for PR and other communications students in writing. Part of this consideration would be the Writer's Advisor--a series of interactive programs designed to assist writers by pointing out potential writing improvements through evaluation of readability, use of quotation, personalization, key word assessment, spelling, punctuation and expression.

Presented to the Public Relations Division, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication Annual Convention, Corvallis, Oregon, August 8, 1983.

A DIMENSION OF THE GRAMMAR, PUNCTUATION AND SPELLING PROBLEM IN PUBLIC RELATIONS WRITING

As student, professional and teacher in public relations and other areas of communications over the past 14 years, I have been shocked, frustrated, angered and exasperated at the repeated errors made by students and professionals in today's English speaking and writing world. Readings and conversations with teachers and professionals convince me that the problem and the consternation are universal. For the public relations field this problem borders on crisis, since PR copy is generally "free" copy and its acceptance by editors depends at least initially on its apparent perfection.

Therefore, teachers in writing for public relations, as well as those in other communications sequences, use much valuable teaching time correcting and teaching fundamentals, to the detriment of the higher writing skills which they are meant to impart. Because of the dimensions of the problem they cannot do otherwise. Errors range from expectable to absurd. One class of mine averaged below 50 percent on the most commonly misspelled words. Another required instruction on "its" versus "it's," "there" versus "their," and "you're" versus "your." Spelling variations within papers support some student's contentions that, "Spelling doesn't count."

It seems counterproductive for teachers in public relations to enter the debate as to whether the fault lies with teachers (always past teachers) who have not taught or students who have not learned (because of less intelligence, less verbal skills required in the visual-video age, or societal permissiveness). Those are important considerations which are being debated and worked with in the appropriate arenas. There is even some evidence that these efforts are being rewarded with improvements in averages of verbal skills. But today's PR teacher must deal with the problem of teaching students who can't spell, punctuate or make grammatical constructions with consistent accuracy by teaching these fundamentals as a first order of learning.

THE PROBLEM WITH THE SOLUTION

Teachers with whom I am acquainted are doing just that. They spend significant portions of their valuable teaching hours in making sure that students understand basic concepts for usage of the English language, teaching by example, testing, repetition and review. It is satisfying to know that one has sent to the professional world a graduate who can write a series of sentences without error. Yet today's PR teacher is continually frustrated that the higher writing skills were not taught because class time was used for the basics.

This is particularly agonizing because today's students (perhaps in part because of ignoring verbal skills) are so much more aware of the world around them and are generally better informed than were those of 14 years ago. We teachers are continually enthused by the thoughts and imaginations of the students who are our fellow writers. We long to be able to help them see how better to express those thoughts and expand their imaginations. But pounding into the student's head the rules for showing possession does not normally give expansion to the artistry of writing.

CONSIDERING THE COMPUTER AS A TEACHING TOOL

The computer is a machine which makes accurate "yes" or "no" decisions with great speed. Because of that facility it can be used effectively and economically wherever problems can be reduced to such absolute decisions. The advent of a multitude of small computing machines makes it apparent that a great number of such problems exist in the world. There has been some resistance to computer assisted instruction in the academic world. That has been so in good part because of obvious limitations of the computer, inadequately fashioned applications, lack of understanding and resistance to change.

Such resistance has not generally been the case in public relations or other communications disciplines. Spurred on by our professional counterparts, we have eagerly sought the help of word processing, management and production in all facets of the print realm. We eagerly embrace the "home" or "mini" models which are of such monumental assistance to our own writing efforts.

Yet there remains some holding back when we consider the use of our calculating friend as a direct teaching tool. It would seem that this is true in large part because we have not decided what it is that we will allow the computer to do. What the computer has not been demonstrated capable of doing is transmitting reasoning processes, concepts, rationales, doctrines or precepts--the stuff of high order teaching. But we have aptly demonstrated our ability through computers to measure through testing the student's understanding of many such concepts and to teach material which can be learned by straightforward association.

Programs are now in existence or development which detect and correct spelling and punctuation errors, calculate readability, correct gross usage and sentence structure errors, and suggest stylistic changes. Teaching applications of such successes are relatively simple and straightforward.

THE GENERAL PROPOSAL

What is proposed here is that public relations and other communications teachers and administrators present an agreed requirement to the data processing industry for computer assisted instruction in journalistic writing. Based on such an agreed requirement, interested industry representatives can propose effective and economical packages for our use. Such a unified proposal could best come from an organization with comprehensive representation such as the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. An agreed requirement does not commit AEJMC participants to industry proposals. It would, however, provide a clearly defined need for a significant market and spur the industry to respond affirmatively. The requirement stated here will be in two segments, for conceptual and economic reasons. Segment One will address the Communications Computer Center, in which basics can be taught by machine after concepts have been mastered. Segment Two will address the Writer's Advisor, an interactive system which assists the student while he or she actually writes.

SEGMENT ONE: THE COMMUNICATIONS COMPUTER CENTER

The Communications Computer Center is envisioned as a laboratory for all communications students. Students would be assigned to train at the video display terminals of the center as a part of writing courses throughout communications. Additional time could be granted in response to student request. Interactive program managers would track each student's work, documenting successfully completed segments, recording scores, and picking up each session where the student left off.

Basic course programs offered at the computer center might include: standard grammar, punctuation, spelling, abbreviation, capitalization, word compounding, use of numerals, titles and additional stylebook conventions. Concepts would not be offered in these programs, except by way of brief review. Students would demonstrate basic understandings in classroom sessions prior to use of the center. Those unable to do so would be referred for remedial English in accordance with school procedures. We would not expect such cases to be frequent, however, due to existence of verbal skills entry requirements for most writing courses in communications.

SAMPLING A BASIC COURSE PROGRAM

In the Communications Computer Center each Basic Course Program, or Module, would be subdivided into several smaller units to aid in programming, repetition and testing. A sample interaction between computer and student, based on a program which I designed and implemented, is presented here:

STUDENT: Sign on, J. Jones, Code:1234, RETURN

COMPUTER: Good day, Mr. Jones. As you will recall from our previous session, JSTYLE is a tutorial program designed to teach portions of our stylebook. For your benefit and that of your course instructor, a record is kept of your name and your grades on each final test you complete in a program module. No other record of your work here will be retained. By the end of your last lesson you had successfully completed the modules on capitalization, and punctuation. The next module is planned to be on abbreviation. If this is a satisfactory progression for you, please type "yes" and then hit the RETURN key. If not, type "no" and RETURN.

STUDENT: Yes, RETURN

COMPUTER: This module considers stylebook decisions on abbreviations. Perhaps you believe yourself already competent in this area. If so, you may wish to skip the instructions and proceed directly to the test. The possible penalty for such a decision would be a poor grade on your record, since

the test is recorded. There is no risk of failure, though. You must simply train and test until you score at least 90 percent correct on the module record test. Now type "Itest" and RETURN if you wish to go directly to the test. If you desire instruction, simply type RETURN.

STUDENT: RETURN

COMPUTER: Abbreviations serve the communicator well so long as they help achieve the dual goals of economy of production and efficiency of communication. RCA, for example, has become so familiar that it is inefficient to print the full name of the Radio Corporation of America. But we might need help to determine whether AA referred to a college junior or a society for alcoholics. The careful writer will generally prefer a complete word over its abbreviation, unless the abbreviation will be quickly recognized by his readers. This caution is especially due when citing groups. It is usually best to spell out the name on the first reference unless the abbreviation is absolutely familiar. Let us test your grasp of this simple but critical point. Should you abbreviate Fair Trade Commission in this lead sentence? "John J. Jones, head of the Fair Trade Commission, resigned his post today." Type either "yes" or "no" and then hit RETURN.

STUDENT: No, RETURN.

COMPUTER: Good. You have the idea. Let's go on.

or

STUDENT:Yes, RETURN

COMPUTER: Actually, you would not want to use the abbreviation for Fair Trade Commission in your lead sentence, your first mention. Many readers might not know what group you had cited. Suppose we try another example. . . .

In the course cited the student is informally tested on each of three abbreviation segments: people, places and things. Each incorrect response causes additional instruction and testing. When he gets through a segment with all correct responses, he takes a ten question non record test on the segment. After passing all three segments, he takes the formal overall abbreviation test through randomly drawn questions. Upon passing this course he may go on to another.

My own experience showed the Basic Course Program to be a great equalizer. In demonstrations I was unable to tell one student's competence from another, although the first had simply gone directly to the record examination and the second had spent many hours of instruction time at the video display terminal. The teacher may have access to any student's computer time and record test scores in order to assist, however.

Although Basic Course Programs may take some time to design, they can be made to be universally applicable (if, for example, all participating members use the Associated Press Styleguide). Nothing in this system keeps the teacher from teaching the Basic Course Programs, if desired. Optimally, however, it allows teachers to concentrate on writing, not rules.

SEGMENT TWO: THE WRITER'S ADVISOR

The Writer's Advisor envisions another interactive program. The student would use it while writing at the video display terminal in his writing class. This is a separate concept from the Basic Course Program and should be considered as a complementing package, both financially and as instructional aid. Programs applicable to the Writer's Advisor exist. Unlike the Basic Course Programs, however, they are imperfect by design and their mastery is not so critical.

There are hundreds of absolutely accurate measurements which the computer can make of texts which the writer gives it to analyze: numbers of letters, words, sentences, paragraphs, capitalizations and punctuation marks; average lengths of words, sentences, and paragraphs; the numbers of times key words called for have been used. It is sometimes difficult to find ways these benefits may assist the writer, however. There are other measures which, while they require writer judgment for application, can be useful. The following few paragraphs indicate some which might be applicable for the Writer's Advisor.

Readability is a measure of some average audience's ability to comprehend a given text. There are several machine programs which correlate very highly with both standard Flesch and Cloze measures. They generally tell the writer

a grade level at which he can be comprehended. Most compute readability based on average word and sentence length. This machine measure gives the writer a consistent measure of reader comprehension ease and is a useful tool.

Sentence length and word length are readability components which, when averaged, can also advise the writer independently of the overall comprehension measure. Both need to be short for broadcast copy. Long sentences make for difficult reading in the narrow newspaper column. Some programs call all sentences of more than 20 words to the writer's attention. And, since good copy generally includes long and short sentences, the computer can count these for the writer.

Some programs look for quotation marks, it being understood that quotations make for lively copy, and remind the writer if his text includes none.

Other programs look for specific words. Extensive use of "you" implies that the writer's copy may be informal and conversational. Some also search for words, normally verbs, which imply that passive voice is being used excessively. One such program might print out this message:"You used the passive verb form 50 percent of the time in this passage. Remember that active verbs mean active copy." The verbs are then cited.

Punctuation and spelling routines are useful advice, but not foolproof. The subject of the story might be named "Joe Zzlch." The apparently extraneous period might follow an abbreviation. The most useful routines highlight probable errors and suggest corrections, which the writer may use or not.

PROGRAM CLICHE searches for trite expressions in its memory, such as "add insult to injury," "hard as a rock," and "sober as a judge." It then highlights these for the writer to retain or remove.

IDIOM searches for expressions such as "conform with the rules" and advises the writer: "In sentence number 22 you used the expression 'conform with the rules.' The accepted idiom is 'conform to the rules.' You may wish to alter your text."

CONCISE suggests replacement of "at all times" with "always," "at the present time" with "now," "for the purpose of" with "for," etc. It suggests that other phrases, such as "all things considered," "as far as I'm concerned," and "for all intents and purposes" be eliminated.

The Writer's Advisor is a useful interactive program set designed to help the writer at work. Its routines are at a level above those to be used in the Basic Course Programs of the Communications Computer Center and they are advisory, rather than axiomatic. They are further intended to free the teacher of writing from focusing on the craft of writing and allowing him or her to concentrate on teaching its art.

WHAT TO DO

Automation can assist measurably in allowing teachers of communications to escape the drills of teaching writing and concentrate on its arts. Computers have proven themselves

historically to be expensive purchases but wise investments. They have not saved money but they have consistently increased quality and productivity.

Those of us in public relations education have a special responsibility to help advance communications because our field interfaces with and depends upon all the others. Our writing impacts on every area of mass communication, and more. I therefore urge that the Public Relations Division of AEJMC take the lead in this application of technology for the sake of higher education.

The PR Division should: (a) Form a committee for consideration of the Communications Computer Center. That committee should solicit considerations from AEJMC membership on the appropriate Basic Course Programs for the center. It should then write and gain approval for an agreed requirement for such centers, using necessary technical expertise. Finally, it should gain AEJMC endorsement for the agreed requirement and make it available to interested companies. (b) Form a committee for consideration of the Writer's Advisor. This committee should consider the long term requirement and value of the Writer's Advisor as an adjunct to existing and expected needs for student terminals. Based on this evaluation it should help AEJMC members to shape student interactive computer requirements in a comprehensive manner, to include use of the Writer's Advisor. The quality of future writers for mass communications depends on our consideration today.

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